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Zoot suit riots 1942 pbs the american experience worksheet answers

Decades of discrimination had caused the Mexican-American community to become insular. By the 1940s, LA's 250,000 Mexican Americans were divided into tight-knit neighborhoods called barrios. These communities were traditional and self-sufficient, but many young Mexican Americans refused to conform to these norms. They spoke English, listened to jazz, wore zoot suits, and defined LA cool. In June 1943, Los Angeles erupted in the worst race riots it had ever seen. American sailors armed with makeshift weapons patrolled Mexican-American neighborhoods, searching for "zoot-suiters" - young Mexican teens who dressed in baggy pants and long-tailed coats. The military men dragged kids out of movie theaters and diners, tore off their clothes, and viciously beat them. In retaliation, Mexican youths fought back. The violence escalated, with taxi drivers offering free rides to the riot area and newspapers publishing guides on how to "de-zoot" zoot-suiters. When the riots ended, scores of Mexicans and servicemen were in hospital beds. The Zoot Suit Riots film explores the racial tensions that led up to this explosion. The documentary describes changes in LA's population - new immigrants, a booming wartime economy, and a huge number of servicemen heading to the Pacific theater. This created a new generation of Mexican Americans who were more confident and self-assured than their parents had ever been. These "zoot-suiters" were defined by their wide-brimmed hats, baggy pants, high boots, and long-tailed coats. Despite having no evidence linking zoot-suiters to crime, the kids' confidence made Anglos nervous. Many Mexican-American parents agreed that something was wrong with their young people. At the heart of this story is an unsolved murder - a 22-year-old Mexican American man stabbed to death at a party in August 1942. This tragedy and injustice sparked a chain reaction that culminated in the Zoot Suit Riots. The racial hostility in Los Angeles had been simmering for some time, fueled by sensational news coverage and recent events. Within months of the verdict, violence erupted throughout the city, becoming some of its worst in history. The documentary masterfully recreates the vibrant world of a Mexican American subculture, as well as the bigotry and hatred prevalent among many whites. It also sheds light on the dedication of a few liberals who fought for justice despite overwhelming opposition. This film serves as a powerful reminder about race relations in the United States today. Looking back, José Díaz's murder in Los Angeles would have played out differently due to the storming of the city's Mexican American community by the police department. The main suspect, Hank Leyvas, and his arrest raised concerns that Mexican youth were unruly. Within months, the city was gripped by violent racial riots, with many pointing to the 1943 riots as a low point in their history. In 1942, the atmosphere in Los Angeles was tense, with the country at war and suspicions of spies and traitors swirling around young Mexican Americans. The media often featured columns warning of the supposed threat posed by these youth, creating an eerie sense of unease. Less than a century earlier, Los Angeles had been part of Mexico, with streets named in Spanish and businesses conducted in the local language. However, by 1942, the city's identity had shifted, with Mexican Americans being viewed as outsiders in their own ancestral homeland. The police caught over 600 young Mexican Americans within 48 hours of José Díaz's murder, including those between 12 and 25 years old. The neighborhood was gripped with fear, with parents warning their children to stay indoors as the police patrolled the streets. Those who ventured out risked being picked up for suspicion or perceived disrespect. The police regularly harassed Mexican kids on the street, viewing them as part of a criminal element if they were seen as suspicious. Any sign of sullenness or lack of respect could lead to physical punishment. The community was advised to stay indoors after 8:00 PM, lest they risk being targeted by the authorities. Hank Leyvas, who had interacted with the police before due to ambiguous descriptions of suspects as "unknown Mexicans," was no stranger to their scrutiny. As a young man who stood up for his rights and protested unjust treatment, Leyvas's experiences highlighted the complexities of the relationship between the LAPD and Mexican American youth in 1940s Los Angeles. By the summer of '42, Hank's life seemed headed in a new direction. He had joined the Merchant Marine, gotten his uniform, but now he was accused of murdering José Díaz. As we pulled up to our destination, my mom started getting out of the car and police surrounded us, arresting my brother. I asked them where they were taking him, and they said the 77th Police Station. Decades of discrimination had turned LA's Mexican American community inward. By the '40s, there were over 250,000 people living in tight-knit neighborhoods called "barrios." The communities were traditional, conservative, but like Hank, some refused to accept their confinement. There was a different America outside these neighborhoods, and many wanted a piece of it for themselves. The tension between old and new cultures caused parents to worry about their children disappearing from the barrio's cultural world. Even though physically they remained, these kids were often drawn into various aspects of American culture. They spoke English with jazz phrases like "cool," "hip," and "on time." Some didn't even know Spanish during this period. The wartime economy put money in the pockets of LA's youth. In '42, they spent it on big balloon pants and long coats inspired by African Americans. The zoot suit was everywhere, ruling dance floors at nightclubs with its stoic moves, embodying L.A.'s cool. One guy would stand still, not wanting to wrinkle his coat or mess up his pants. As soon as they left the house, kids beelined for Central Avenue's jazz clubs to listen to artists and dance swing. They found ways to sneak around their parents' disapproval and wearing a zoot suit was part of that. Many would roll up their skirts until they got around the corner, then change back. So, they wore zoot suits really wide at the knee. It was like a statement. They were always so high-waisted and ballooned out. The boys had those huge pants that went way down to their ankles. Their parents thought they were becoming "pachucos," which meant punk or ill-mannered kids. In LA, people got upset because these kids were confident and wore zoot suits. They defied the rules of segregation by walking around freely. It was hard for them back then, as everything told them they didn't belong. They weren't supposed to be in certain neighborhoods, clubs, or restaurants. Tensions rose when 50,000 sailors came to town before heading off to war. Some sailors had never seen Mexican Americans before and got upset about the diversity on LA streets. This led to frequent fights between sailors and Mexican American boys from Chavez Ravine. Mexican American kids during this time mostly accepted segregation by thinking of their neighborhoods as their own. They resented white military personnel, especially those pumped up for war, ready to take down the enemy. Sailors had no choice but to walk through a mostly Mexican American neighborhood on their way back from a night out. It was best not to be alone as a sailor in that area. You just wanted to blend in and avoid trouble. You're asking for trouble.There were instructions from the base to go down to the sail shop, where they sewed 13 pennies into our neckerchiefs. This was supposed to be a way to defend ourselves against groups of Mexican American teenagers if any trouble came our way. They told us that if we needed to use this as a billy club, we should take off the neckerchief and hit them with it. It was said that 13 pennies would give you quite a strong blow.And we all had those neckerchiefs. Each fight gave them an excuse for the next one. Sailors would insult Mexican American teenagers, who in turn would taunt the sailors.(sirens blaring) The police were also having problems with Los Angeles' Mexican youth.Escobar mentioned that during the war years, the L.A.P.D.felt frustrated because they were losing their best and most experienced officers to go into the Army or Navy. They were now facing this new phenomenon of the zoot suiters. You'd often hear them say they wanted to take off their kid gloves and deal with the zoot suiters more harshly, seeing them as a criminal element. Inside the 77th Precinct's interrogation room, Hank Leyvas couldn't have imagined what was in store for him.The Sleepy Lagoon case was unfolding like a Hollywood movie. Hank was portrayed as the villain, and the ending would surprise everyone. The arrest of Hank and 21 other boys made front-page news.Hank and his friends admitted to engaging in a fight but denied killing José Díaz.They stuck to their story despite harsh treatment by the police. Henry Ynostroza mentioned that during interrogation, they were trying to get them to confess. He described how the officers would put gloves on so as not to mark their hands, then hit them all over-the body, face, and legs-they even kicked them in the legs. Henry's brother Hank was picked up, and when Henry went to see him at the police station, he found his brother in a terrible state, handcuffed with his head down and his lip hanging low.Henry asked to see his brother but wasn't allowed to. When the largest mass trial in California history began in October 1942, Chief Clem Peoples was there, building a case against Hank and the boys. He was also writing articles about Sleepy Lagoon in a pulp magazine. The trial was overseen by Judge Charles Fricke, known for being strict in enforcing law. He had a reputation for taking prosecutors aside to educate them on presenting evidence and was perceived as infallible by some. Despite defense objections, Judge Fricke required all defendants to sit together, separating them from their lawyers. The defendants had been denied basic amenities like haircuts and clean clothes since their arrest. During the trial, Judge Fricke ruled that the defendants' disheveled appearance was relevant evidence. He rejected requests for the defendants to clean up, insisting they should appear as they normally did. As a result, the defendants looked unkempt and rough. The jury viewed the defendants unfavorably, perceiving them as vagabonds rather than the tidy individuals they once were. Only Hank Leyvas seemed aware of the significance of the trial, knowing that his conviction would send a message about the city's control over Mexican youth crime. The prosecution portrayed Hank as the leader of a ruthless gang, but the defendants testified that they had been driving around looking for the boys who had attacked Hank and his girlfriend earlier that evening. As they approached the party where José Díaz was found beaten and stabbed, a fight broke out. The defendants testified that they had gone on the attack after finding José in a vulnerable state. Despite their testimony, the prosecution's portrayal of them as ruthless killers seemed to prevail in the eyes of the jury. When the scuffle ended, those helping José were pulled away. A boy spotted Díaz on the ground and hit him again. The defendants admitted that one of their group had struck Díaz but denied any responsibility for his death under oath. Though never charged with murder, the 38th Street girls were portrayed as equally dangerous as the boys in the press. Though eight girls testified against them, they refused to cooperate. One of them was Lorena Encinas, who knew who killed José Díaz but kept it secret. The trial dragged on for three months. Hank Leyvas's mother remained hopeful throughout. On January 12, 1943, the jury delivered its verdict, leaving the defendants in shock. Seventeen were found guilty. Hank Leyvas was sentenced to life. Some of the boys broke down in tears, but others, like Hank and Ynostroza, tried to stay strong. The boys were sent to San Quentin prison, 400 miles from home. The girls from 38th Street were taken away, becoming wards of the state and eventually ending up at a notorious reform school. Lorena Encinas was sent to the Ventura School for Girls due to its notorious reputation. She had made secret arrangements to escape but ultimately chose not to use them. The school's purpose was to punish women who failed to cooperate with the courts during a murder investigation involving José Díaz. Prominent figures like Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth were part of the Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee, which aimed to secure the release of the defendants accused in the murder. Activists from various backgrounds, including educators and politicians, also joined the cause. As tensions escalated between sailors and zoot-suiters, skirmishes became a daily occurrence. The situation continued to deteriorate until June 3, 1943, when a confrontation between service personnel and civilian youth led to a violent outbreak. to ignite into all-out chaos on the streets.In the heat of it all, a sailor's jaw was shattered, he hit his head and had to be dragged back by his buddies, who were armed with belts and clubs.The Zoot Suit Riots had finally erupted.BRAY: Our commanding officer gave us the green light.He told us, "We've had enough."So we geared up, grabbed our gun belts, wrapped them around our hands, and took back the streets.I was in a downtown theater watching a movie when suddenly, the lights flickered on and I heard a commotion.A bunch of guys were yelling and I saw servicemen viciously beating Mexicans.GLORIA RIOS BERLIN: The fight wasn't just fists; some were wielding chains.So I hid under the counter to protect myself as things got out of hand.It was like something from a movie.NARRATOR: 12- and 13-year-old boys were among those brutally beaten in theaters because of their clothes.I've heard that many servicemen returned home happy, but it didn't change the fact that innocent kids were mercilessly attacked.(chains rattling) NARRATOR: The following night, hundreds of sailors took their aggression to the heart of L.A.'s oldest Mexican neighborhood.SÁNCHEZ: Servicemen would cross the river and head into communities like Boyle Heights, targeting Mexican American youth who had stopped showing up downtown at theaters and bars.As the riot escalated, it became a "search and destroy" mission.And that's when things really took off in East Los Angeles.NARRATOR: Once they were in the barrio, sailors didn't just target zoot suit-clad boys; any Mexican they encountered was fair game.SÁNCHEZ: The riots grew as people began to see the zoot suits not just as fashion but as a racialized identity.So what started as an attack on individuals because of their clothes turned into a broader assault on Mexican Americans.(crowd chaos) ♪ ♪ NARRATOR: It didn't take long for the kids from the barrios to organize and stand up against this injustice.RUDY LEYVAS: We waited in an alley behind the theater, it was getting dark.So when those truckloads of sailors and civilians came, we were ready.And as they emerged, we knew what was coming. They're there! They came in. When they got all the way in, we all went out. People were shoutin'. I had a bat and used it too. There were people hurt on both sides. Sanetti's tellin' us, "We were fightin', kickin', bitin', and scratchin'." He even got hit a couple of times and got knocked down. They took him back to the base, put him in sick bay for the night. The next mornin', he went back to doin' his normal stuff but had two big shiners on his face. They came at nighttime, every time. So we'd just disappear and they wouldn't find us. But then we figured out that if we watched 'em on Whittier Boulevard, we could get even with 'em. When there were four or five guys in a car, we'd follow 'em till they had to stop on the boulevard. Then, we'd jump out and start beatin' up the driver's side of their car and get at the other guys too. On the fifth day, 5,000 civilians came to help us sailors. I was 16 then, my brother was only 14. We drove our mom's car to El Toro and picked up some Marines. It felt like we were in a war zone. The pachucos had taken over Los Angeles. I felt like I was doin' my part for the war effort. There was this guy who helped us, never met him before. He said, "Hey, are you guys fightin' sailors?" We said yes and he gave us his car with gas in it. Told us to use it, take one of them white guys out for him, leave the keys on Central Avenue, and he'd pick up the car. All he wanted was for us to get one of those servicemen. By the end of the week, everyone knew about the Zoot Suit Riots. Thousands of Marines, soldiers, and sailors came from all over, including Las Vegas, to clean up Los Angeles. The Mexican American kids were overwhelmed. A bunch of servicemen started takin' their clothes off and burnin' 'em on the streets. The L.A.P.D. would just hang back during this whole thing, never tryin' to stop it. They'd show up after everything was over and arrest the victims. Sanetti's tellin' us that the shore patrol would come out right away, break up fights, and take those pachucos down if they could catch 'em. they would put them in the jeep and take them to jail With the sailors, they'd take us a couple of blocks away from our ship or get back to the station none of the sailors got arrested You tell me one sailor that got arrested for beating the hell out of somebody huh people shouting Within four or five days Los Angeles officials realized "This could move us out of control-- out of control in a wartime society" they declared the city off limits to servicemen and the rioting ended soon afterwards The city council banned zoot suits on L.A streets wearing them was punishable by 30 days jail and stores stopped selling them Mexican American youth were taught during World War II that they couldn't just express themselves in any way they had to follow rules The governor created a citizens committee to investigate the cause of the riots ironically the 38th Street boys got special treatment while in prison Hank Leyvas was sent to Folsom prison after refusing to play along with the authorities he wrote about feeling alone behind the iron door Leyvas grew resentful and his defense attorneys filed an appeal claiming their clients were denied a fair trial Hank Leyvas and his friends had been locked up for more than two years when they received news of their appeal's success. A telegram from San Quentin told them that their conviction had been overturned, with the message ending in "Oh, what a wonderful morning." Initially, they couldn't believe it, feeling like a shock. To celebrate, they dug up a barrel of homemade beer they had hidden and got drunk in the barracks. As Hank Leyvas walked out of the Los Angeles Hall of Justice in October 1944 wearing a zoot suit, he was ever defiant. However, the court's decision to throw out the verdict did not clear the 38th Street gang members of the murder charge. The Sleepy Lagoon murder haunted Hank and others for life, preventing him from joining the Merchant Marine. Years later, Lorena Encinas revealed that her brother Louie was involved in the murder. She had kept this secret to protect her brother but admitted it to her daughter, Judy Torres-Preston, as part of her own story. According to Lorena, Louie was at the party before the 38th Street kids arrived and got thrown out for causing problems. Later that night, José Díaz and his companions were met by an angry Louie Encinas and his friends, leading to a fight in which José Díaz was stabbed and left to die. In 1943, an investigation into the Zoot Suit Riots concluded that racial tensions played a significant role in the violence. However, the mayor had a different explanation, attributing the riots to juvenile delinquents rather than race. The Sleepy Lagoon Defense Committee was unable to aid the 38th Street girls, who remained under the supervision of the California Youth Authority until they turned 21. Lorena Encinas passed away in 1991. Years later, Hank Leyvas and other former inmates left prison, only to return time and again. Tragically, Hank became familiar with life behind bars before his death in an East L.A. bar in 1971. The Sleepy Lagoon murder case remains unsolved.